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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the literature on the elderly prisoner, defined in the majority of studies as 50 or 55 years of age. A discussion from several surveys dealing with the numbers of older adult felons is presented and the crimes that brought these older men to prison are described. Some of the characteristics of older prisoners are discussed, including lower intelligence, poor health, marital instability, and a poor employment record. Psychological problems are noted, and the effect of the length of time spent in prison on the older person's reference groups is described. The issue of age integrated versus age segregated environments is also discussed. The paper concludes with a critique of research methodology in studies of older prisoners and recommendations for more effective study. (JAC)

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AN EXAMINATION OF THE ELDERLY PRISONER THROUGH A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

One-half of one % of all prisoners (felons) are 65 and over, and are predominantly first time offenders committing a crime of passion (murder or manslaughter). The aged inmates are found to be poorly educated, functioning at a low level of intelligence, in poor health, widowed or divorced and classified as having no gainful employment. Psychologically the elderly prisoners are insecure, fearful and becoming 'sedated' (giving up.) Sociologically, the length of time in prison affects the older person's relations and reference groups. The concept of institutional neurosis occasionally appears and manifests itself in older prisoners not wanting to leave prison. The elderly are also associated with social control as persons not likely to riot and serving as a stabilizing force. In their social participation the older prisoners' friendships will tend to be age graded and social activities will diminish with time. The aged prisoner will have an inverse relationship between social participation and institutional dependency. The issue of age integrated versus age segregated environments is discussed and living patterns for accommodating aged prisoners are suggested. The paper concludes with a critique of research methodology and recommendations for more effective study.

The elderly in prison* have been overlooked or ignored by Gerontologists. Are they absent from view because they are so few, or have they been neglected because "old criminals offer an ugly picture" (Pollack 1941).

How Old is an Older Prisoner

The older persons in prison are persons who have committed criminal offenses, have been found guilty of those offenses and officially sentenced, and are serving time in penal institutions. But to answer the question of how old is an older prisoner or what numerical figure can we agree on to define the chronological age of the older prison inmate is less definitive. Our review finds the older inmate is so-called at age twenty-five-plus (Straus and Sherwin 1975) finished at 40 (Silfin 1977) or to the outer limit of over eighty-two years of age (Aday and Webster 1979,) while the majority of the studies use age fifty or fifty-five to define the older inmate. Age 65 plus is rarely addressed.

How Many Are There

R.H. Aday (1976) makes an attempt through analysis of unified crime reports. At age 40 there are reports that the elderly represent five percent of the prison population. (Aday 1976). A more exacting picture is that produced by Krajick (1979) where he reports that studies show that one percent of the prison population are 60 and over and one-half of one percent (1,500 people) are 65 and over. More specifically, they found in New York state 180, North

*The terms "older offender" and "criminal behavior among the elderly" are often associated with the older prisoner. However, these described conditions and statuses may not lead to incarceration, thus not being prisoners. (See Schichor and Kobrin 1978). One also needs to be aware that many elderly while committing crimes do not go to prison because there may be a general tendency not to prosecute elderly and that the family will have a tendency to hide the deviance of their aged member.

Carolina 170, and South Carolina 90 persons over age 60. A recent survey by the New York State Department of Correction Services, could account for, as of February 1981, 57 inmates who were 65 years of age and over (Grossman and Macdonald 1982). We must also be aware of the fact that as age increases the incident of arrest decreases, and that criminal involvement declines gradually with advance age. (Muberg 1953) (Pollack 1941). (Kelley & Vedder 1968).

What Crimes Do the Older Persons Commit? What Brings Them to Prison*

Some authors relate incarceration with the context of capability that could be associated with the sociological concept of opportunity. (Pollack 1941) (Moberg 1953). Do the elderly in their later years have the physical agility to burglarize or the labidinal capacity to sustain erection long enough to commit rape? If one accepts a deprecatory perspective on aging one could rationalize varied crimes not "opportune" for the elderly. Physical changes in the elderly prevent them from becoming involved in activities that demand stamina and physical effort (Bergman and Amir 1973).

But there is a consensus in the literature that the older first offender will be found to have more often engaged more in crimes against persons (Teller and Howell 1979) and that these crimes against persons will be violent crimes of passion, killing wives, neighbors or relatives (Krajick 1979). Schichor and Kobrin (1978) explain this by pointing out that as the range of social interaction contracts with advancing age, interpersonal primary relationships become intense, with a resulting increase in opportunities for conflict. The crimes will be murder and manslaughter (R.H. Aday 1976) (Panton 1974)

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*This review deals only with designated felons that are incarcerated in Federal and state prisons. The misdemeanants sentenced to local or county jails are not dealt with here; however, it is of interest to note that misdemeanant crimes of alcohol abuse and shoplifting may well be on the rise with older persons.

The fact that the elderly participate in sex crimes is often referred to in the writings. While these crimes would be inclusive of statutory rape, offenses against chastity, common decency morals and the like, they are rarely detailed and quantified. Even so, they would rarely be felonies.

The Profile

How can we generalize about this unique population? We cannot. On one hand, it is said that the elderly inmate (Weigand and Burger 1979-80) is competent, responsive, quick and shrewd. These qualities are necessary since survival in prison requires living by one's wits, and the older inmate has lasted a long time. And on the other hand, it has been found (Panton 1974) that the aged inmate (age 60 and above) functions at a lower level of intelligence than the non-aged inmates, presented considerably lower I.Q's and educational achievement levels and more than twice the number of mentally defective than younger inmates. They were more likely to have histories of poor general health, were more likely to be divorced or widowed and were more frequently classified as having no gainful employment with a less stable work record. The aged had high incidence of involvement in alcohol. However, there is agreement that there are two distinctive types of elderly offenders (Wiegand and Burger) 1979-1980) (Teller and Howell 1979): a) the recidivist or multirecidivists, or chronic offenders who may spend many years in and out of prison (Bergman and Amir 1973); and b) the older person who commits a first offense after a lifetime of being a law-abiding citizen (Teller and Howell 1979). From these studies it is generally found that the first offender had a better social status and social participation (including marriage); a positive attitude toward life and affirmative religious attitudes.

The older first offender may find it more difficult to adjust to the deculturalization process found in the process of prison socialization. It is suspected that this phenomenon may explain the fact that the older first offenders have an extremely favorable prognosis for resisting dependency. It is perceived that from their set ways and rigidity they resist being socialized into the prison system, and contrariwise, it has been found (Keller and Vedder 1968) that multiply-incarcerated older inmates were found to more closely resemble the younger inmates in terms of a criminal way of life and thus would assimilate readily into the prison culture. Very few studies are to be found on the incarcerated elderly female. The only one to be found, indicated that "when they are family participants, older inmates have often assumed the roles of mother or father, both of which command considerable respect and influence within the group. (Foster 1975).

To add further to the sorry state of the older inmate, it has been found that the physical and mental condition of the older individual deteriorated rapidly while he was in prison. The aging prisoners are at the mercy of younger, more aggressive and difficult prisoners who tend to frighten, ridicule or even harm them. The aged prisoner becomes depressed, anxious and consequently dependent on the warden and prison staff for protection. They are deprived of friends, employment and decent accommodations. (Bergman and Amir 1973).

But to conclude these perceptions on a more positive note, Reed and Glamser (1979) found 15 of 19 subjects reporting that they felt younger in prison. This was explained by observing that given the social class background of most prisoners, this is likely to be an accurate perception. Older prisoners are not exposed to heavy industry, hard labor, or heavy drinking. They eat well, rest often and have ready access to medical care. This is unlikely to be the case among lower and working-class men on the outside.

Since we do not have a consensus on the profile of the older inmate in prison, let's take a more particularistic examination. What happens psychologically to the inmate? How is he socially affected? Before we report study findings, there must be a realization that prison experiences are affected by characteristics imported into the system as well as by the dynamics of the intrasystem circumstances. Jensen (1977) and Hendricks(1981) both express the need to explore the direct and indirect influence of both imported characteristics and situational variables on inmate behavior and culture. The effects of prisonization on the aged could be as much a product of vulnerable individuals as they are of institutional structures (Reed and Glamser 1979) and thus vulnerability accounted for by selection.

Psychological Affects

Through the use of psychological tests varied psychological findings come to the fore. S.B.G. Eysenck et al. (1977) found that younger prisoners (under 30) had a positive extroversion score and did not show an elevated neuroticism score; the older inmate had a negative extroversion score (introverted), and a high score on neuroticism.

From a sample of 30 inmates over age 65 (19 Black - 11 white) Ham (1976) found a higher degree of insecurity, more expressed fear of pain, a constant fear of illness, more fear of correctional officers, authority and a heightened fear of young Black inmates, fear of the future and fear of having no place to live on the outside. Hormuth et al. (1977) found that "higher age led to generally lower activity and less expectations, which in some cases, might be evidence of a phenomenon of helplessness or the feeling of giving up." This 'sedation by age' affected their expectation for freedom. While they had fewer incidents of untoward behavior, they expected fewer furloughs. It has also been found that the older inmate would be more likely to refrain from participation in a riot than a younger person (Straus and Sherwin 1975).

With the use of the MMPI tests, Panton (1976-1977) found the older inmate to be more neurotic and less psychotic in responses than the general population with greater anxiety, despondency, apprehension and concern with physical functioning. They appeared to be naive and self-centered and were likely to be demanding of attention and support and appeared inclined toward avoidance of responsibility. They expressed fears of inadequacy and insecurity and were likely to be intimidated and easily influenced by younger more aggressive inmates. They do not show a profile of serious mental illness. Also, through the use of MMPI, McCreary and Mensh (1977) also found increases in neuroticism and less psychotocism. They also found less impulsivity and acting out tendencies. Teller and Howell (1979), with a BiPolar Psychological Inventory of 15 scales and 75 traits, found less psychic pain amongst the older inmates, with their being depressed, impulsive, hostile, but less socially deviant. It has also been found that older men cope satisfactorily. They cause less trouble because they are more mature and less sexually involved (Wooden and Parker 1980). The elderly are less future-oriented and acquire institutional neurosis, manifested by lack of expression of desire for freedom, mechanical behavior and void of emotional expression (Hicks and Alpert 1978).

Sociological Factors

A very definite factor in the understanding of the older inmate is the length of time spent in prison,* and how this time away from the open society influences the inmate's relations and reference groups. Aday and Webster (1979) note that "for many inmates, the prison environment helps to destroy relationships with those who, at one time, might have been significant others. Severing ties with family and friends may force inmates to either withdraw into themselves or turn to the prison environment for emotional support". Adams and

*The author is aware of the multitude of studies addressing length of time incarcerated (particularly related to parole outcome). The few references in this paper are focused specifically on the elderly.

Vedder (1961) associated long time served with certain consequences for institutional dependency by saying, "A long sentence may persist despite good prison conduct and parole may be denied reasonably because the prisoner has no family to whom he could go.... If society has little place for the older man in general, it has even less place for the elderly prisoner or ex-convict".

The length of imprisonment when linked with the concept of social roles is another potential frame of reference that may have an impact on prison adjustment. Sociological concepts of role theory (role loss, ambiguity and gain) come into play. Here we would find, in prison, a loss of certain accustomed roles and the socialization into new roles in the new environment. Aday and Webster (1979) explain this by saying "initial imprisonment is a type of forced social disengagement from their customary social milieu, and axiomatic exposure to a new socialization process.

In this light, institutionalization can be perceived as a positive, as well as a negative process; for prisonization gives the prisoner a new subculture, new role, new identity and new social group--which are vital for social and psychological well-being. The longer the normal roles of the life-cycle are disrupted, the more likely the older prisoner will establish new roles in the inmate social system.

The length of imprisonment has oftimes raised the question that Ham (1976) asks, "Do the elderly who have been incarcerated for an extremely long period of time (25 years or more) develop a dependency from a so-called man-made disease called institutional neurosis that manifests itself in their lack of not wanting to leave or be released from prison?" Other writers have also suggested that long-timers indicated increased concern about re-entry into the community and less willingness to attempt it. But the data to support such contentions is scarce.

The sociological concept of social control is interspersed throughout the literature. This concept attributed to the aging condition assumes that the elderly perform a vital function in stabilizing the prison society and hence serve as crucial and to custodial and institutional control.

Witz (1978) puts it this way, "Because older inmates are better adjusted to prison life, special privileges are granted to them by correctional officials. To protect these privileges, aged inmates attempt to control the violent tendencies of younger inmates which may disrupt their highly valued status in the social system. It is because of their stake in the stability of prison that the treatment received by older inmates differs from the treatment received by young inmates." It has also been found that older inmates are less prone to rule violations and are not to be found escaping (Jensen 1977). It has been observed that the presence of large numbers of old people in an inmate population may serve as a stabiling or deflating force on an institutional environment where tensions seem persistently high and a riot is an everpresent possibility (Straus and Sherwin 1975).

Concerns with social participation at both the primary and secondary levels are addressed in the literature. There is evidence that marital status, visits with family and kin, and outside reference groups tend to diminish with the length of imprisonment and as time goes by the aged prisoner becomes more dependent on the institution (Aday 1976). Hendricks (1981) found that older Black inmates actually had fewer problems adjusting to prison life than did younger prisoners because they were successful in their efforts to maintain family ties and supportive networks while incarcerated. It has also been found that older inmates are more able to cope satisfactorily because they had family and outside social support. (Wooden and Parker 1980). Social participation was studied by Gillespie and Galliher (1972) through tests for anomie. They found that for some, prison retarded the aging process and that friendships tend to be age-graded. The tests of participation in leisure time activities, association

with other inmates, and the extent of boredom found that inmates who have aged faster had less leisure time activities, have fewer contacts and do not see time pass quickly. While it has been said that time served does not affect attitude (Gillespie and Galliher 1972), the opposite has been found by Hicks and Alpert (1978) when they discovered over time that the older inmates increased their positive appreciation of police and decreased their positive evaluations of their lawyers.

Family life for the chronic elderly offender was found to be more unstable with high incidence of divorce than for the late offender. The chronic offenders were less likely to receive visits and support from family and friends when paroled (Aday 1976). In this same study that tested social participation with institutional dependency, it was found that there was an inverse relationship between the influence of outside reference groups and institutional dependency, the length of imprisonment will have a direct relationship to institutional dependency, age at time of first imprisonment was inversely related to institutional dependency and institutional dependency will be greater for the chronic offender than the late offender. The older inmate takes a greater interest in religion and participates more in religious activities (Panton 1974) (Reed and Glamser 1979). It has also been found that older offenders especially those who have been incarcerated for long periods of time, were relatively uninterested in prison education in spite of the need for their low literacy levels, (Shinbaum 1979).

While some researchers find the imprisoned elderly joining organizations and taking interest in politics (Reed and Glamser 1979), others have found that higher age led to generally lower activity and less expectations, which in some cases, might be evidence of helplessness or the feeling of giving up (Jensen 1977). "The older inmates are not as easy to motivate as the younger guys. They need a lot of coaxing to get them to do anything at all. It would

be good for them if we could do that, shake them out of their boredom, you know, but that takes a lot of people and we don't have that... There isn't much we have here that's of interest to them...!" (Krajick 1979). This truism was recently supported by a study that showed forty-seven states and the federal prison system reported no formal special consideration to the older inmate. (Goetting 1982).

The Parole Commission is always looking at educational attainment, social participatory activity and work ability. It will also consider a place to live for the re-entry. It is not likely that the elderly will score well (Krajick 1979). Wiegand and Burger (1979) found that the educational and vocational training were of no value to the elderly and therefore did not alleviate parole problems. They also found that by not being active in any organizations, having no support systems, no place to live, health problems and unemployability made them poor parole candidates.* This reviewer has noted a surprise finding in that parole boards have shown a bias in favor of the release of older Black inmates in preference to other inmate categories (Carroll 1976). It has been rationalized that these events take place because there is a leniency attributed to a benign paternalism, a form of bias not uncommon in relations between Blacks and whites and subordinate Blacks who are perceived as nonthreatening.

Age Integrated Versus Age Segregated

The issue of age integrated versus age segregated environments is as alive in the field of corrections as it is in the general field of gerontology.

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*While the elderly inmate is seen as a poor parole candidate, Hays and Wisotsky (1969) found from a relatively small sample that on being placed on parole that these men maintained active lives and made good adjustments to their community.

The virtues of separate facilities are recommended so that special programs should be implemented to meet the needs of aged prisoners because age specific groups in institutions can contribute to the mental health of members. Research reports that participation in age specific groups: 1) increases self-respect; 2) diminishes feelings of loneliness and depression; 3) reactivates desire for social exchange; 4) re-awakens intellectual interest; 5) creates a sense of identification among members and a shared feeling of shared historical legacy; and, 6) increases capability to resume community life. (Krajick 1979) (Wiegand and Burger 1980). But Ham (1980) did not share these findings. From a report on an evaluation of a special unit for older persons he found that this limited duty unit isolated them from the larger part of the prison and the general inmate population, the expressed function of this unit was to provide institutional housing for aged inmates to "alleviate discrimination of aged inmates by virtue of the fact that present programming was not commensurate with their pysiological and sociological needs." The same services were provided younger inmates who were physically unable to function in the routine correctional setting.

"In reality, however, the unit was administered in the same fashion as the various cell blocks and other units of confinement. No special privileges, treatments or programs were provided."

Methodological Limitations

The literature is fraught with methodological limitations in the conduct of the research, as well as unusual limitations due to the nature of the prison as a closed society. Almost all of the studies reviewed contained serious sampling problems. While the intent of the studies were conducted to draw inferences about the characteristics of the populations, there was no randomness and the studies merely reflected on the particular groups sampled. Many other researchers admitted to invalid study by proffering excuses.

Some of the limitations that researchers were confronted with by the nature of the system they were investigating were: 1) lack of access to records; 2) bureaucratic interference; 3) self-selection and voluntarism bias, and, 4) the realization that the people they were interviewing were expert con artists "many subjects probably responded to the interview in such a manner to insure that good relations with the staff would be continued. Other questions may have been negotiated in a cautious fashion to insure that parole would not be hindered. Thus, establishing communications in an environment where little trust is evident is certainly no easy task and has a variety of built in limitations" (Aday 1976).

Conclusion

Despite the above weaknesses in the research reviewed, the scarcity of items indicates a strong need for more research on the elderly prisoner. And to learn from these pioneer efforts: 1) that reliance on invalid and nonrepresentative data be abandoned; 2) that there be more rigor in compliance with acceptable standards of research; 3) that there be a greater caution in the perpetuation of unsubstantiated beliefs (i.e. elderly are disabled, dirty old men, elderly are conservative, etc.) 4) that there be a wariness in accepting studies that reflect either an ignorance or naivete about the prison environment and, 5) since many studies are found with inherent limitations due to singular disciplinary approaches (i.e. psychological, sociological, etc.) more thorough work could be achieved if undertakings could be interdisciplinary (Silfin, et al. 1976) in investigating the phenomena.

This literature review was offered to contribute understandings of the older persons incarcerated in prisons. It is hoped that these understandings will sensitize and stimulate persons in gerontology to devote their energies and services to enable the older person to lead a law-abiding and socially

rewarding life.

Who knows as we consistenly pursue least restrictive environments, we might even ask the improbable question--do we really need to imprison older people?

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